

PIONEER LIFE IN AMERICA / *Crossing the Plains*

By the 1830's, the first big westward migration had pushed the frontier to the Mississippi Valley. Pioneers were rapidly settling Arkansas, Missouri, and Iowa—states just west of the Mississippi River. Explorers, missionaries, traders, and fur trappers had gone even farther west and southwest. They told of great forests and fertile valleys in the Oregon region and other lands west of the far-off Rocky Mountains.

The stories of the trailblazers made exciting news for many midwestern settlers who, by the 1840's, were ready for new adventures. The news also stirred hundreds of families arriving from the East seeking places to settle. In 1846, the Mormons, fleeing persecution in Illinois because of their religious beliefs, began their journey to the valley of the Great Salt Lake in Utah.

After gold was discovered in California in 1848, the sands of fortune seekers joined the migration. So did many French Canadian fur traders.

The westward trails led over great stretches of dusty, treeless plains and waterless deserts. They went through dangerous mountain passes, and crossed a treacherous rushing stream and wide, muddy rivers. Travelers had to be on guard every moment against Indian attack. But the first settlers of the Far West, the earlier pioneers who had crossed the Appalachian were eager for new opportunities. They were willing risk their lives to reach the distant lands.

Some who set out on the westward trail died on the way, but few turned back. The men and women who succeeded became heroes of an important chapter in the



WOMAN WORKING (Illustration by H. Charles Brown)
A Backbreaking Climb up a steep riverbank was just part of a day's work for the pioneers of the 1840's. Sometimes friendly Plains Indians helped the settlers along the trail to the West.